Études canadiennes / Canadian Studies
Revue interdisciplinaire des études canadiennes en France

83 | 2017
Le Canada et ses définitions de 1867 à 2017 : valeurs, pratiques et représentations (volume 1)

Ramsay Cook and French Canada

Donald Wright

Electronic version
URL: http://journals.openedition.org/eccs/970
DOI: 10.4000/eccs.970
ISSN: 2429-4667

Publisher
Association française des études canadiennes (AFEC)

Printed version
Date of publication: 31 December 2017
Number of pages: 147-152
ISSN: 0153-1700

Electronic reference
Donald Wright, « Ramsay Cook and French Canada », *Études canadiennes / Canadian Studies* [Online], 83 | 2017, Online since 01 December 2018, connection on 10 May 2019. URL : http://journals.openedition.org/eccs/970 ; DOI : 10.4000/eccs.970

Ramsay Cook and French Canada

Donald WRIGHT
Université du Nouveau-Brunswick

En partant d'une variation autour de Julian Barnes, ce bref essai examine la découverte par Ramsay Cook du Canada français, en même temps qu'il examine la nature de l'histoire et de la biographie.

Riffing on Julian Barnes, this short essay examines Ramsay Cook's discovery of French Canada at the same time as it looks at the nature of history and of biography.

The novels of Julian Barnes all ask a big question, "what is history?" Whatever else it is, it's a story, according to Barnes, and there is always more than one story. He writes in *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters*:

> We make up a story to cover the facts we don't know or can't accept, we keep a few true facts and spin a new story round them. Our panic and our pain are only eased by soothing fabulation ; we call it history. (BARNES 1989 : 242)

Ramsay Cook once told me that he found Barnes's definition of history to be "challenging." It is especially challenging for biographers who must spin a new story out of a few true facts, write around the facts that will never be found, work with imperfect memories, locate a narrative thread connecting the different parts of a single life, and soothe the pain of death.

Described as the most important historian of his generation, Ramsay Cook lived a large and interesting life as a professor, writer, and editor. Because we are meeting in Paris, I want to focus on Cook and French Canada. And because I have only a few minutes, I have written 3½ chapters, not 10½.

Chapter 1

Born in 1931 in Alameda, Saskatchewan, Ramsay Cook grew up in a succession of small prairie towns, including Morden, Manitoba where he attended high school. Although a good student, school didn't really interest him. But sports did, especially hockey in the winter and baseball in the summer. In fact, hockey and baseball gave him his first introduction to French Canada when he played against teams from Letellier, Saint Malo, and Saint

Norbert, all Franco-Manitoban communities. They were "positive, if sometimes bruising" encounters, he said (COOK 2005 : viii). Another early and distinct encounter with French Canada occurred when the Red River flooded in 1950. The town of Morden opened its doors to evacuees from Saint Jean, many of whom spoke very little English. Recalling the incident, Cook said that while there were no discussions of bilingualism, biculturalism, or asymmetrical federalism, there was enough adolescent and innocent flirting with French girls to satisfy his curiosity.

Although Cook's "discovery" of French Canada was limited to hockey, baseball, and a few weeks in the spring of 1950, it left a lasting impression: Franco-Manitobans spoke a different language and practised a different religion, but they weren't Other. They played sports, went to school, worked on their parents' farm, experienced tragedy, accepted kindness, and returned the favour.

Graduating from high school in 1950, Cook attended United College, now the University of Winnipeg. Although he didn't study French Canada, he did study nationalism with William Rose, a visiting professor whose reading list included Johann Gottfried Herder, the eighteenth-century German philosopher and intellectual father of nationalism. Herder insisted that the nation consisted of a people, or *volk,* with a shared ethnicity and language, and that the nation was the natural basis of the state. Against the backdrop of the Second World War and the Holocaust, and against the backdrop of the prairies that didn't have, and never would have, a shared ethnicity, Herder's ideas didn't make any sense to a young Ramsay Cook. In his words, he "disliked him" (COOK 2005 : x). Seeing it as a dangerous force premised on the logic of insiders and outsiders, Cook finished the course with a dim view of nationalism.

Chapter 2

Cook completed his undergraduate studies in 1954, thinking that he might like to work in the Department of External Affairs. But first he wanted to do graduate work. At Queen's University he took a graduate seminar in French Canadian history from Arthur Lower and Fred Gibson. As a high school student, he had read a perfectly boring text book that largely ignored French Canadian history after 1759. As a United College student, he had studied European, British, and American history. But at Queen's he was introduced to a part of Canada that he barely knew existed. Cook was both fascinated and

challenged. “As a westerner, I had viewed French Canadians as one minority among many” (COOK 2005 : x). But immigrants, he said, had chosen to become Canadians. French Canadians hadn’t, meaning they could make claims that immigrant groups couldn’t.

Lower encouraged his “brilliant” student to read *Le Devoir* (LOWER 1967: 324). Cook wrote:

> The experience was, as Lower had no doubt intended, puzzling but exhilarating. Being from Winnipeg, where freight rates, grain futures, and the threat of Saskatchewan socialism dominated the pages of the local newspapers, I was immediately carried away by the endless discussions of Catholicism, corruption, [and] centralization.

And so began what he called a “long, faithful, and rewarding” love affair with Quebec’s newspaper of record (COOK 2005: 134, 135).

Shortly after Lower introduced him to *Le Devoir,* one of his fellow students introduced him to *Cité Libre*. Cook was immediately impressed by Pierre Trudeau’s anti-nationalism. A few years later he and Trudeau met at the wedding of mutual friends, beginning a friendship that lasted forty years, the length of Canada’s constitutional civil war. In a 1968 article in the *Toronto Telegram*, journalists Harry Crowe and Doug Fisher wrote that “when the historian Ramsay Cook looks into a mirror he sees Justice Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau and when Mr. Trudeau looks he sees Professor Cook” (COOK 2016 : 13).

Chapter 3

As a young professor at the University of Toronto in the 1960s, Cook wrote for, and soon joined the editorial board of the *Canadian Forum*. The Quiet Revolution and the Other Quiet Revolution constituted the historical backdrop. In his many essays, he criticized French Canadian nationalism and its excesses, both real and perceived. He opposed English Canadian nationalism, believing that the “answer to French-Canadian nationalism is emphatically not English-Canadian nationalism.” He welcomed the appointment of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism, seeing in it a new respect for the French language in English Canada. And he championed Pierre Trudeau, calling him “the most brilliant political commentator in Canada” (COOK 1964 : 50).

In 1966 Cook published *Canada and the French Canadian Question,* a collection of essays on politics, nationalism, survival, and the writing of history. Although distinct, the individual essays are connected by a set of common themes: nationalism is an intellectual and political dead end; federalism works; and Lord Acton was right. Acton had rejected the nationalist state – arguing that it couldn't accommodate ethnic and cultural diversity – and insisted instead on the separation of the nation and the state: "The coexistence of several nations under the same state," he wrote, "is the test, as well as the best security, of its freedom" (COOK 1966 : 5) In his words, Cook "quickly became a convert" (COOK 2005 : x).

Two years later, in February 1968, Cook received an invitation to meet with Trudeau at the Royal York Hotel in downtown Toronto. Trudeau hadn't yet decided if he would seek the leadership of the Liberal Party and he wanted Cook's advice. It was an "extraordinary, almost unbelievable" evening: Ramsay Cook the associate professor making a case for why Pierre Trudeau the justice minister should run for the leadership of the Liberal Party. Trudeau was worried that he would be seen as "*un roi nègre*" by Quebeckers. Cook agreed that yes, some would see him as a *vendu* in the same way that some had seen Laurier and St. Laurent as sellouts, but on balance, he believed that Trudeau had a historic opportunity "to restore the confidence of French Canadians in the federal system" (COOK 2006 : 51, 47, 60). According to Cook's version of events, Trudeau seemed especially interested in the comparison to Laurier.

Cook played a minor role in the 1968 election when he moved to Ottawa to become one of Trudeau's speech writers. In fact, he wrote Trudeau's now famous speech on national unity, "The Just Society." But he declined a permanent position in the PMO. A teacher and scholar, he belonged in the university. For the most part, he supported Trudeau's career, although the October Crisis and the imposition of the War Measures Act tested his support. According to Eleanor Cook, Ramsay was so upset that he didn't speak for two full days. Twelve years later, Trudeau more than redeemed himself through the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, something that had been on Cook's wish list since his graduate work on civil liberties at Queen's University. As he explained,

> Since my belief in the need for a constitutionally entrenched bill of rights had begun thirty years earlier when I was Arthur Lower's

> graduate student at Queen's, I was happy about the political choice I had made in 1968. (COOK 2006 : 151)

Chapter 3 ½

How do we write the biography of someone we admire ? Not easily. After all, Cook was something of a hero to me as a graduate student. But that doesn't make him right about French Canada, French Canadian nationalism, Pierre Trudeau, and the constitution. Indeed, it will be my task to assess critically his ideas, which is what Cook wanted. He had no interest in dictating his memoirs to me.

Maybe the last word should go to Julian Barnes, an author we often discussed. In *Flaubert's Parrot*, an experimental novel about the impossibility of biography, he compares biography to a fishing net :

> You can define a net in one of two ways, depending on your point of view. Normally, you would say that it is a meshed instrument designed to catch fish. But you could, with no great injury to logic, reverse the image and define a net as […] a collection of holes tied together with string. You can do the same with a biography. The trawling net fills, then the biographer hauls it in, sorts, throws back, stores, fillets and sells. Yet consider what he doesn't catch: there is always far more of that […]. But think of everything that got away, that fled with the last deathbed exhalation of the biographee. (BARNES 1984: 38)

Maybe the question isn't "how do we write the biography of someone we admire?" Maybe it's, "how do we write biography?"

Bibliography

BARNES, Julian (1984), *Flaubert's Parrot*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

BARNES, Julian (1989), *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters,* New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

COOK, Ramsay (1964), "A New Awakening," *The Canadian Forum,* 44:521, 49-50.

COOK, Ramsay (1966), *Canada and the French-Canadian Question,* Toronto: Macmillan.

COOK, Ramsay (2005), *Watching Quebec: Selected Essays,* Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press.

COOK, Ramsay (2006), *The Teeth of Time: Remembering Pierre Elliott Trudeau,* Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press.

LOWER, Arthur (1967), *My First Seventy-five Years,* Toronto: Macmillan.